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USDA Grant Helps Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley Improve Lives through their Community Garden

The Chinese proverb says, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life.” Although the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley isn’t giving fishing lessons, what they are teaching will help feed and improve the lives of Valley residents for a long time to come.

Through the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Food Bank was able to acquire a \$2,500 grant that has helped them expand their Valley Community Garden. The funds were used to purchase tools and the supplies needed to add a 50 x 35 foot garden plot to the existing garden. Now, more individuals and families can have their own area to tend while participating in the community garden program.



Chris Bueno, manager of the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley's Community Garden and the Pharrmer's Market shows Jessica Benavides-Paredes, NRCS soil conservationist, the layout for the community garden. The plans include a storage shed, an outdoor classroom, and more raised garden beds to allow elderly or those who can't get on the ground, a way to participate in gardening. On the computer is a photo of what the area looked like before the community garden was started.

“The Food Bank RGV’s Community Garden is all about collaborating with public and private partners,” says Terri Drefke, chief executive officer of the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley. “The collaborating is key in accessing the resources and knowledge necessary to move low income families into a sustainable lifestyle -a healthy lifestyle filled with fresh fruits and vegetables and the possibility of sharing or selling their excess to others in the community.”

“We have found families excited to learn that food is actually grown in the soil, not just purchased at the grocery store. We are thankful for the \$2,500 grant to help us expand our garden and add more families to the program.”

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The Food Bank funded and started the garden in May 2014 with the assistance University of Texas-Pan Americans Texas Rural Cooperative Center under the direction of Rick Carrera, director of the Texas Rural Cooperative Center. Training programs on soil health, how to handle pests and take care of the plants, as well as cooking and nutrition classes are part of the community garden program.

“We want to create a self-sustainable circle by educating the families in classes, as well as hands-on in the garden on how they can grow their own food, and how they can eat healthier by teaching them how to prepare the produce they grow,” says Christopher Bueno, manager of the Community Garden and the Pharrmer’s Market “Plans are for the families to ultimately be able to grow surplus here or at their own home which then can be sold at the Pharrmer’s Market.”

The Pharrmer’s Market is located at the Food Bank, 724 N Cage Blvd in Pharr and is held every Thursday 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Working in the garden shows the volunteers of all ages how a variety of plants are grown such as kale, Chinese cabbage, and collards, as well as providing an opportunity to share the importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables. Gardening also provides the volunteers physical activity which can help improve their health.

The results of a 2011 Gallup and Heathway’s study of 190 metropolitan statistical areas in the United States revealed that nationwide, 26.1% of American adults were obese in 2011. The population obesity rate for the McAllen, Edinburg, and Mission, Texas area was 38.8 percent, making it the heaviest in the reported areas.

Bertha Venegas, State Outreach Coordinator for NRCS, who assisted the Food Bank with the grant opportunity says, “By engaging these families in learning how to grow their own food and showing them where their food comes from, plus showing them how to take care of the land, we are accomplishing USDA’s vision.”

Venegas works with communities and organizations through the USDA’s StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative, of which Texas is one of 20 states within the initiative. This community garden exemplifies the initiative’s mission of providing assistance to communities in persistent poverty areas for improving their quality of life and creating conservation opportunities in rural communities and tribes across the nation.

Bueno is also checking into installing a seasonal high tunnel or “hoop house” as part of the community garden. He read about how “The Garden” at the High Plains Food Bank in Amarillo received technical and financial assistance through NRCS to install one.

USDA’s Vision: To expand economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America to thrive; to promote agriculture production sustainability that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and to preserve and conserve our Nation’s natural resources through restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands.

Bueno is receiving requests from families who are “food-secure,” but want to teach their children how to garden. He says many of these families come from farming or ranching background in the Valley, and they want their children to know how these relatives raise their own food, and not buy it from the grocery store.

“I have found that working in the garden at the Food Bank has made me become aware of what I eat,” says community gardener, Nancy Trevino, of Pharr. “I have learned a lot of new things that I took for granted about vegetables. It’s fun and very interesting.”

Bueno and the Food Bank staff are also working with local churches, apartment complexes and public housing complexes and other partners to develop on-site community gardens so families who cannot come to the food bank to participate in the program, can still learn about growing their own food and healthy eating.

“Knowledge is power. We hope that the families will continue growing and sharing their knowledge with family and friends and that community gardens will expand all over the Rio Grande Valley in neighborhoods and communities,” says Drefke.

For more information on the Food Bank’s community garden or to participate in the Community Garden program, contact Chris Bueno at (956) 904-4525. For information on Strikeforce opportunities, contact Bertha Venegas at (830) 249-3508.

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Jessica Benavides-Paredes, NRCS soil conservationist, visits with Chris Bueno, manager of the Food Bank's Community Garden and the Pharrmer's Market, among the rows of vegetables in the community garden.



Felicita Lugo from San Juan, who participates in the Community Garden program, checks radishes to see if they are ready to harvest.



Myriam Gonzalez and Naissa Lopez, who work with the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley, sell fresh veggies at the Pharrmer's Market. Families who are participating in the Community Garden will be able to sell their surplus of produce at the Pharrmer's Market.

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